

Date: March 25, 1994

To: Town Council

From: Open Space Preservation Committee

Re: Preservation of Streambelt Environments in Mansfield

The accompanying report gives in summary the year-long study of the streambelt environments in Mansfield and suggests action that can be taken to preserve these valuable assets.

During the course of our study we contacted most of the property owners to determine what plans they had for future use. They were informed of the town's interest in preserving the streambelt environments.

The committee recommends purchasing some properties and securing easements on others. The public should be educated on the need to protect and preserve these environments.

There is a short list of owners of important properties who have indicated their willingness to sell to the town. The Open Space Committee recommends that this list of properties be added to those previously recommended for purchase and a new priority list be prepared.

Open Space Preservation Committee Report On Rivers

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Introduction

During the past year the Open Space Preservation Committee has studied the stream belts of Mansfield's four (4) rivers to determine how best to protect them from further development and make them accessible to the public. This report summarizes our findings and offers suggestions on actions that are needed to protect and improve the river environment.

Fortunately, much of the land adjacent to Mansfield's rivers is still open with only a few areas where undesirable development has occurred. The wetland and aquifer protection regulations will prevent development of the flood plain and adjacent areas. There are, however, areas not in flood plain that are important for recreation, as access areas for boating and fishing, or for plant and wildlife protection, which need to be preserved. In some cases these areas extend a considerable distance from the river. Consequently, in many locations, it becomes essential to preserve not only the adjacent stream belt but larger forested and open areas.

The Open Space Preservation Committee has spent many hours in the field identifying the areas that need protection from further development. The report in the following pages summarizes these findings and makes recommendations for methods of protecting the valuable open space associated with the river corridors. Most of the owners of significant areas have been contacted and their response is included.

In preparation of the report these values of preservation of each property were considered.

1. Aquifer protection
2. Protection of water sources for the Willimantic Reservoir
3. Access for boating and fishing
4. Hiking trails
5. Scenic visitation and esthetic value
6. Wildlife protection
7. Historic areas

Methods to be used in preserving these values were decided upon and recommendations made in the report. When possible, priorities for action are included.

It is noted that much information on riverbank properties is contained in other previously submitted reports.

Importance Of The Rivers To Mansfield

Mansfield is fortunate to have flowing through its landscape four rivers: the Fenton, the Mt. Hope, the Natchaug and the Willimantic. In addition to helping ensure a viable continuing supply of water for drinking and household and commercial uses, the rivers contribute significantly to the scenic beauty, the recreational opportunities and the ecological balance of the local environment.

The corridors along the four rivers are the bases of greenways connecting many of the main areas of the town. River corridors provide travel routes for birds and wildlife, many types of which require large connected areas of habitat. Preserving a greenway along the rivers is one way of ensuring good wildlife habitat and assisting nature in maintaining the desired balance.

All the rivers of Mansfield are designated by the Department of Environmental Protection as major trout streams; the classification reflects the current excellent water quality. The streams attract large numbers of fishermen, but particularly those from around the state who wish to fish for trout, with which the streams are stocked.

The rivers are also attractive to canoeists. Canoeing is the ideal way to enjoy a wild area with the least disturbance to nature; the impact of the human passage is limited to the start and the end of the trip. It is possible for people of all ages and degrees of physical ability to enjoy a canoe trip. The waterways of Mansfield offer canoeing opportunities from easy to challenging.

In many places hiking trails follow the river corridors, offering residents the pleasure of scenic river vistas while profiting from the benefits of walking as an exercise. For non-hikers the river corridors are a source of quiet contemplation and relaxation.

The river corridors contain several of the major aquifer recharge zones. Protecting the banks of a river goes a long way, toward ensuring the natural cleaning of the water and protecting the ground water, affecting both the quality and the quantity of the water.

Much of the value of the land in Mansfield is based on the open space and the water -in The aquifers the same applies to possible expansion of commercial and state employment opportunities. Hence, there is a direct link between the town's future economic well-being and its water supply. The importance of the rivers of Mansfield cannot be over-estimated. Action to preserve them and the land that forms their banks is in the town's best interest.

The Fenton River

Located in the center of town, in large part protected by state, federal and trust ownership, the Fenton River is the crown jewel of the Mansfield river systems.

The Fenton is host to many uses. The Nipmuck Trail roams over protected and private properties through the valley. There are several old mill and dam sites. The university owns a large section on the northwest bank for the protection of several wells that supply UCONN with potable water. The federal government owns both sides of the river on the more southerly reaches for flood control purposes. The State stocks the Fenton with trout and the river is extensively used by sportsmen. The valley is host to varied wildlife.

The objective of open space preservation along the Fenton ~s the acquisition of those parcels that connect protected areas, provide access to the river, preserve historic sites, safeguard the Nipmuck Trail and protect the underlying aquifer.

Private landowners along this river are keenly aware of how precious the Fenton River Valley is to themselves and the community. Some landowners are interested in working with the Town to see that the river is protected for future generations. The current lull in the real estate market, depressed real estate values and the Town's open space purchase monies give us 'a fleeting opportunity to preserve a Fenton River Valley Corridor.

Properties of owners who have indicated a positive response to preservation of their land and/or granting conservation easements are listed below.

A. Section between Route 44 and Old Turnpike Road:

Azaroff property--This one-acre parcel 'contains both sides of the river and includes the remains of an old mill site on the east side. The eastern riverbank to the north across Route 44 is currently protected, and UCONN owns the property to the southwest across Old Turnpike Road. Inclusion of this section of river land could possibly complete a corridor for the Nipmuck Trail that must now take a jog up Old Turnpike Road. The parcel is, easily viewed from the road and is readily accessible. The owner is interested in its preservation, but will apply for a building lot status if the Town does not purchase the parcel.

B. Section between Old Turnpike Road and Codfish Falls Road:

The area on the east between the two roads is heavily forested and steep. The homes along Codfish Falls Road are at the top of the rise some distance from the river. This land is an important part of a larger forested area that has significance for its scenic beauty, wildlife

Habitat and protection of water quality. Consequently, it becomes necessary not only to protect the land adjacent to the stream but the entire forested area. Negotiations with these interested property owners are recommended:

Schoef property--Located about midway between Route 44 and Gurleyville Road, this land has long level frontage on the river. This large parcel is just north of the UCONN wells and so must contribute to the Fenton aquifer. The owner has responded favorably to preservation of the property but has not indicated whether he is interested in sale or easement. Because a house is at the front of the property, there is no river access from the~ road.

Melichar property--This is a landlocked parcel of about four acres; public access would probably be difficult to provide. There is a small hill on the property that slopes down to the river and marshy areas. The land is in close proximity to the UCONN wells. The owner would like to sell this property; it could, perhaps, be had for a relatively good price.

Keil property--This parcel is also landlocked. The land is high and steep with relatively little river frontage. It, to, is close to the UCONN wells. The owner would like to sell outright~

Kessel property--Abutting the Keil property to the south is the Kessel property, which has extensive river frontage. The land has good elevation to the river. The owner is considering some kind" of conservation easement.

Cazel property--The owner would consider an easement that may be granted without financial consideration along a river trail.

C. Section between Kessel property and Gurleyville:

The land area in this section is mostly low flood plain. Consequently, the likelihood of the land being developed with additional housing is remote. Also the awareness by current property owners of the importance of open space preservation and protection of historic sites offers insurance against future undesirable development. Access to the river is possible only by crossing private property, but there is presently little opposition by the land owners to such use. Therefore, acquisition of land or easements is not being considered at this time.

D. Section south of Gurleyville on the east bank of the Fenton River:

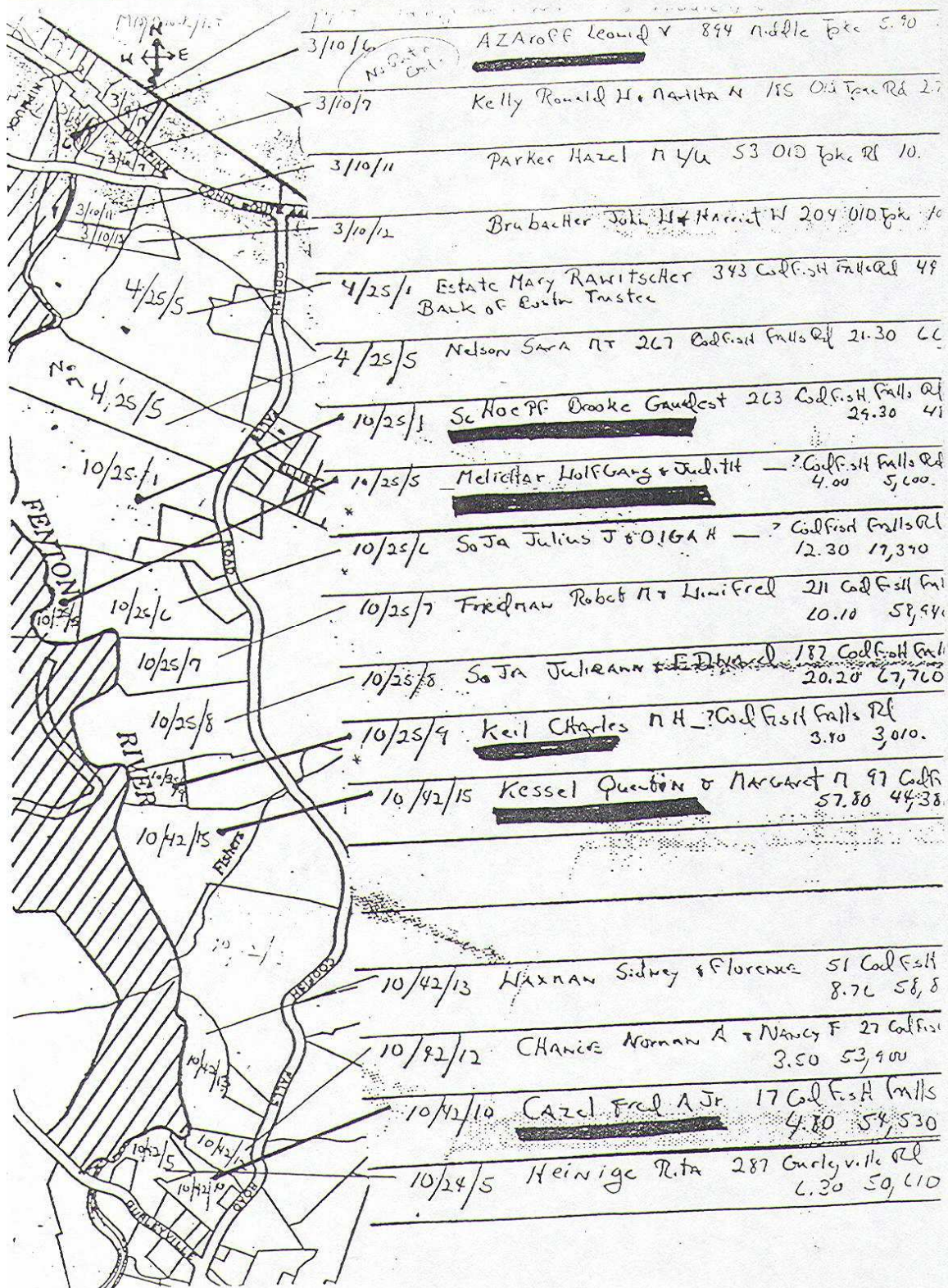
Torrey property--This parcel lies south of Gurleyville Road on the west bank of the river but has relatively little river frontage. The Nipmuck Trail goes through the property. A letter has been received from the family expressing interest in preservation of the land and protection of the trail.

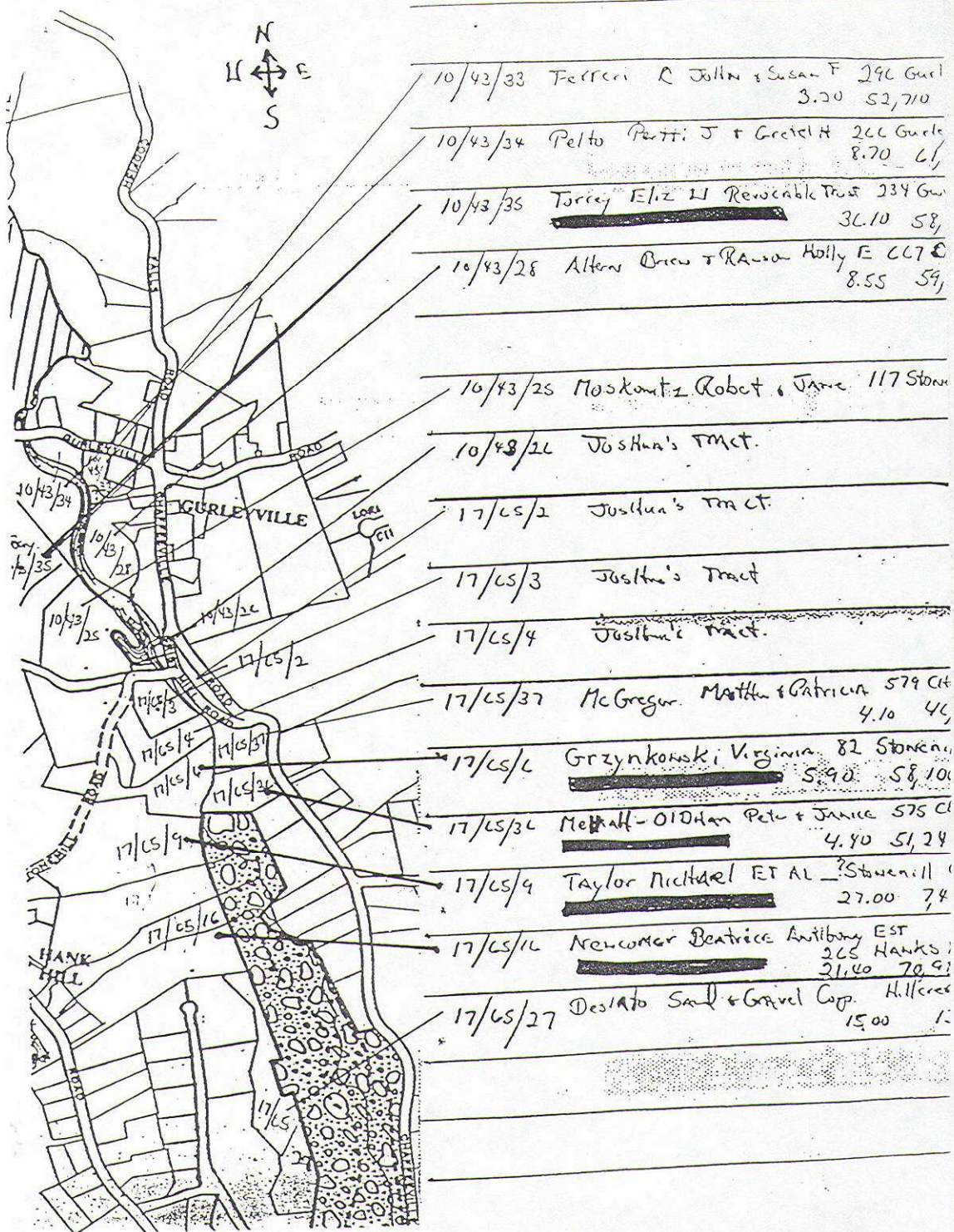
Grzymkowski property--This land has a nice stretch of river frontage. It is a key parcel to completing a protected area from the gristmill to the federal flood control lands on the west bank of the river. The owner is very interested in seeing the river area protected and may be willing to donate the river frontage to the town.

Taylor, et al property--To the south of the Grzymkowski property is land owned by Taylor and others. They would be interested in discussing a conservation easement in that part of the property that is near or joins the river. It is probable that an easement granted without would be financial consideration.

Newcomer property--This land no longer touches the river, the river area having been purchased by the federal government in the 1950's. It is possible that the owner would consider an easement, with little or no compensation, on that part of the property that is near the river.

Merrill-Oldham property--Abutted on the north by the newly acquired McGregor property and on the south by federally protected land, this property is another key parcel in completion of a protected corridor south of the gristmill on the east bank of the river. . The Nipmuck trail passes through the property. The owners have expressed interest at times in the preservation proposals.





The Mt. Hope River

The Mt. Hope is a rocky-bottomed stream which occupies a narrower valley than does the Willimantic or even the Fenton. Towards the northern end (of the Mansfield section) of the river, residents share an informal jogging trail along the river. At its southern end--from Brookside Lane onward--the river runs through federally controlled land; this segment features a handsome gorge in Atwoodville: and, at high water levels, a few whitewater play spots for kayakers.

Along much of the Mt. Hope (within Mansfield's borders), private houses are located relatively close to the river and to one another. This makes the prospects for establishing hiking trails along its banks far poorer than in the case of the Fenton or the Willimantic. But the Mt. Hope does provide important opportunities for fishing and canoeing; and, of course, the need to protect the ecology of the river is as great in the case of the Mt. Hope as in that of the other rivers.

Objectives at which stream belt conservation on other rivers might appropriately be aimed seem not to fit the particular case of the Mt. Hope. For example, it is probably unrealistic to speculate about one day providing a hiking trail along the Mt. Hope; in all likelihood at least some landowners would judge that a trail infringes on their privacy too much. Another appropriate aim for some stream belt conservation projects is that of ensuring that the native plant growth, needed to preserve the ecological integrity of the river, remains intact. But the stresses to which the Mt. Hope's ecology is exposed are not nearly as severe as, say, the stress placed on the Willimantic River by UCONN's sewage facility.

There are other possible objectives which at least deserve mention. In the early part of the century it might have seemed desirable to secure public ownership of the river banks so that canoeists might float down the river without being found guilty of trespassing. But communications between our committee and the DEP indicate that the law is changing on this point. Or one might seek to expand fishing easements along the river, which already extend for a fair distance, or ensure that they never have to be renewed. But the DEP has on its own accord secured some easements, and may secure more when the state's economy improves.

Finally, one has to weigh the costs when asking which objectives should be pursued. These are not just financial. Few landowners responded to the Town's letter asking about their willingness to let the Town gain control (in one form or another) over river-side land. Follow-up phone calls, which our committee made to (most of) the few who did respond, indicated that these landowners like the river, and think they themselves are doing at least

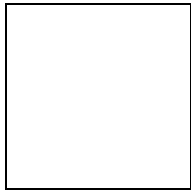
as good a job at preserving it as the Town would. It seems likely they would be somewhat irritated at further efforts by the Town to exercise control of their land.

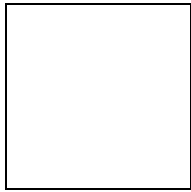
Consequently, as a long-term goal, our committee recommends that the Town seek to acquire conservation easements from property owners along the river, at least in those cases where owners would not be likely to feel that easements encroach on their enjoyment of their land. (A good way of encouraging willingness to sell or give easements might be to publicize the DEP's stream belt buffer program; their documents help make clear how complex and vulnerable the ecology of a river like the Mt. Hope is.) As a more immediate goal, our Committee recommends purchase of one or two parcels of land north of the Mt. Hope Road bridge. The main idea would be to provide legal access for canoeists, as far upstream as possible; an added benefit would be providing a place for lovers of nature to walk along the Mt. Hope without trespassing. The recommended parcels are:

Frances Dwire parcel. Mrs. Dwire wants to sell this land. It would provide fairly easy access to the west bank of the Mt. Hope from Route 89. The portion of the parcel along the road itself is a flat clearing--potentially good for parking (despite some -sightline problems at the road), and almost big enough to be a ball field.

William Ell parcel. Located almost directly across the river from Mrs. Dwire's parcel, this property is not occupied by any dwelling. It is said to contain remnants of an old mill. At present, it is too densely overgrown to provide canoe access.

The Algonquin Gas Transmission Co. property. The company might be willing to sell an easement for hiking along the east bank of the river. Their property extends for such a long way that it might then be a manageable task to extend a trail north to Mt. Hope Road and south to Laurel Lane, or even Brookside Lane.





The Natchaug River

Along Mansfield's southeast boundary is a short stretch of the Natchaug River. Above the Mansfield Hollow Dam, federal ownership protects the riverbank. Below the dam, there are large and small house lots along the river. The larger lots offer an opportunity to protect significant river frontage above the Willimantic Reservoir, which furnishes water for Willimantic and parts of southern Mansfield. Purchase of these lots is not recommended, but conservation easements could prevent removal of vegetation, dumping, and other activities that would adversely affect water quality in the Willimantic Reservoir.

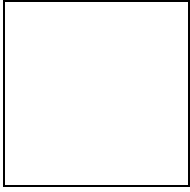
The following properties have potential, either because they have long frontage on the river or because they are undeveloped. These owners have not been previously contacted by the town concerning conservation of open space on their properties; hence, no details are provided.

Tishler property -- Lot 11, 12.5 acres

Potter property -- Lot 12, 19.9 acres

Lamb property -- Lot 17, 10.3 acres
Lot 16, 2.5 undeveloped acres

Barker property -- Lot 18, 1.4 undeveloped acres



The Willimantic River

The Willimantic is Mansfield's largest river. Much of its valley is a broad floodplain with glacial terraces along the edge. Travelers can enjoy scenic views of this valley along Route 32, especially in Mansfield Depot where hayfields of the UCONN and the Green farms step down terraces to the river.

The Willimantic River is part of the proposed Quinnebaug-Shetucket National Heritage Corridor, so a greenway along the river is being planned. At this time, the major public properties along the river consist of the UConn farm and the town's Merrow Meadow Park (which together form a completely protected east bank between Merrow Road and Route 44), and a DEP Wildlife Management Area south of Plains Road on the west side in Coventry.

Because this river has a good water flow most of the year, it is a popular canoeing and fishing site. More public access is desirable for these activities. A riverside trail may be possible along the length of the river (it would switch between Coventry and Mansfield at the road bridges). On the Mansfield side, a trail is being developed from Merrow Road south to Route 44 on town and state lands. It could be extended south to Plains Road. Other sections could be on the Coventry side.

The entire Willimantic valley is an aquifer that includes two major deposits (more than 80 feet deep) -- a small one that straddles Route 44, and a large one extending from Coventry Road south into Windham (most of it is on the Coventry side). Neither is currently tapped for large water systems, but both have the potential for such use. Wells located between Merrow Road and Route 44 currently supply water to the Mansfield Training School (MTS) area and to UCONN.

South of Plains Road, the river's water quality is affected by outflow from the MTS sewage plant. Immediately downstream from this plant, Eagleville Lake is held behind a flood-control dam. This shallow, marshy area is popular for boating and fishing. Below the dam, the UConn sewage outfall joins the river.

Water quality below both sewage plants is now rated B (fishable and swimmable). Protection of natural vegetation along the riverbank is important to maintain this rating, especially in light of proposed increases in the use of the sewer plants.

Because the river flows along Mansfield's boundary with Coventry, both towns are working to protect the river's resources. On Mansfield's side, a railroad track extends along the river valley. The best opportunities for purchase or easements are in land-locked properties between the river and the railroad.

First priority for protection is the section between Route 195 and Route 44. If all the private land became town properties or easements, Mansfield's entire riverbank above the UConn wells would be protected. (Most of the floodplain on the Coventry side between 195 and Merrow Road is now town property.) This section could also provide more public access for fishing and walking and canoe landings. Available properties are listed below.

A. Section from Route 195 south to Merrow Road:

Mihaliak property- -Owner is considering gift Floodplain of an easement to town.

Bousa property--Mrs. Bousa expressed interest in town ownership, but she has since died. Her heirs indicate that they will consider open space protection (sale or easement) during estate settlement. Property has a permanent DEP fishing easement. Floodplain.

Wilcox property--Owner is willing to sell his undeveloped parcel, but not without adjacent house. Fishing easement could perhaps be arranged. Upland and floodplain.

B. The section from Merrow Road south to Route 44 is protected by the town's Merrow Meadow Park and UConn/DEP land.

Second priority ,for protection is the section between Route 44 and Route 275. Protection of the deep aquifer at Route 44 is desirable, and there are opportunities for more public access for fishing, walking and canoe landings.

Available properties are listed below.

A. Section from Route 44 south to Plains Road

McCollum property--Lynn McCollum is interested in a protective easement of the deep aquifer under this property. Upland and floodplain.

Quinn property--The Quinns have offered to the Town a gift easement along an old farm road from Mansfield Depot Road down to the river. The road needs a short boardwalk across a wet area. Easement will provide public access to the river for walking, fishing and canoe landing (not a launch -site). Recommend requesting a protective easement of deep aquifer under this property. Upland and floodplain.

B. Section from Plains Road south to Route 275

(recommendations only; properties may not be available)

Canoe launch at Plains Road- -Recommend request for canoe launch on DEP Wildlife Management Area (Coventry side).

Green farm--Recommend investigating possible purchase of development rights of area between Route 32 and the river to preserve scenic view.

Desiato property--Recommend protective easement preserve buffer between gravel operation and river along riverbank

Third priority for protection is the section south of Route 275. The available properties offer recreational potential for walking and fishing or offer protection of a riverside buffer below the UCONN sewage outfall.

A Section from Route 275 south to Coventry Road.

Watts property- The Watts parcel between the railroad tracks and the river is adjacent to nine acres of DEP land along the river. A fishing trail on the DEP property could be extended onto the Watts property with a return loop on the wooded hillside. At the top of this hill is a fallow farm field that has potential for playing fields. Mr. Watts wishes to keep the field at this time; however, he might consider an easement for access to the wooded slope along the river. Upland and floodplain.

Bobb et al property--Randall Bobb expressed interest in sale (or possible donation) of a riverside parcel that is close enough to the water level to provide flood control and nutrient retention below the UCONN sewage outfall. (Most other parcels have steep banks.) Floodplain.

Romanowitz property--A gift, now under town ownership. It has access to, and that serves the river from Route 32 for fishing (parking for one car at present) and it protects 3000 feet of river frontage with low land serves the same function as the Bobb property. Floodplain.

B Section from Coventry Road south to the Windham line.

Two properties are available in this section: one is located at 115 Thornbush Road and the other is the Cheney property. The latter has been described in a previous report on open space acquisition.

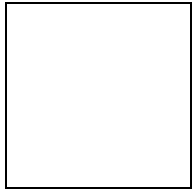
115 Thornbush Road--This property is immediately south of property designated as "open space" and is owned by William and Virginia Valvo. It is on the floodplain and is subject to flooding when the river is high. Mr. Valvo said the water rose to a depth of 8 feet around his house in 1988. At the time of the visit to the site it was beautiful with large trees and looked ideal for recreational purposes. The owner would consider a sale or granting an easement.

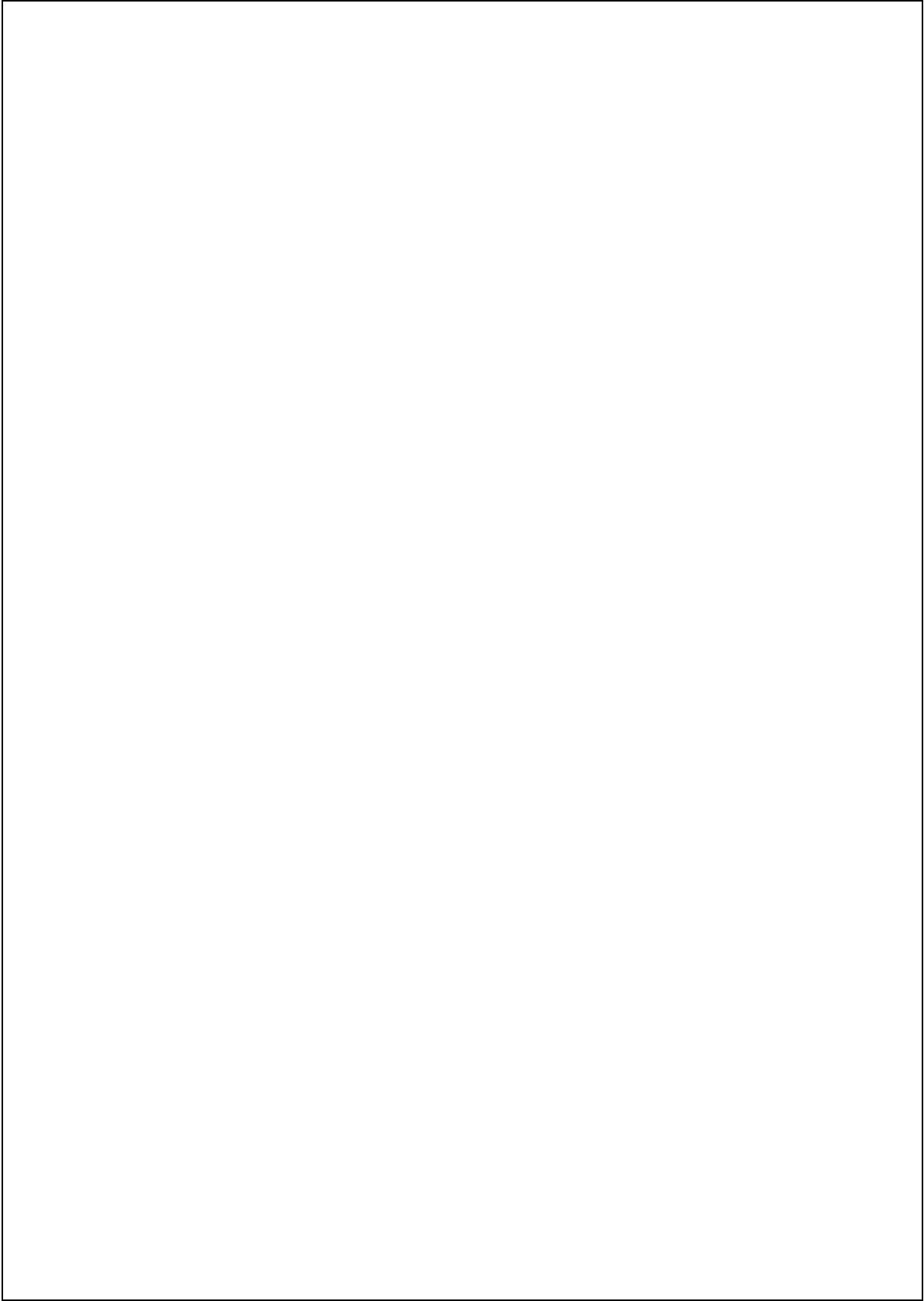
Richard A: Cheney, Sr. property--This property is located between the railroad tracks and the Willimantic River, starting approximately 800 feet south of the Thornbush Road railroad crossing, and continuing to the Willimantic town line (shown on Map 36, Block 83, Lot 7). It is 7.3 acres. For the most part, the elevation is above the flood levels of the river. It is wooded and there are numerous paths and trails used (without Mr. Cheney's permission) by trail bikers.

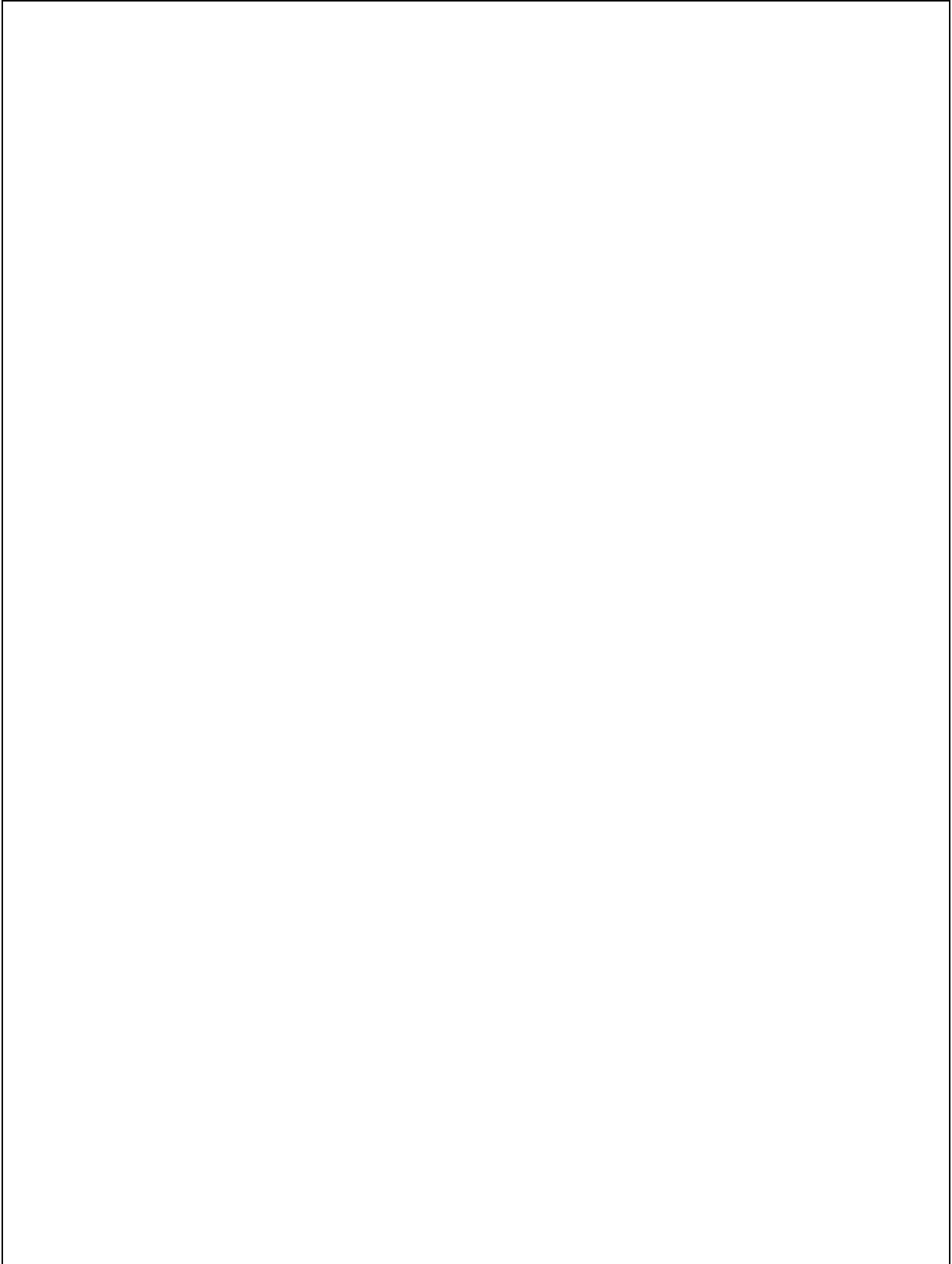
During a walk over the entire property, there was evidence of wild life throughout the site. At present, there is no ready access, but Mr. Cheney says land records show at least four (4) rights-of-way for crossing the rail tracks. The Town of Mansfield owns the property east of the tracks at the south side of the Thornbush Road crossing, which extends to a crossing right-of-way to the Cheney property - Were his property to be acquired by the Town, Mr. Cheney suggests the town land could be used for car parking.

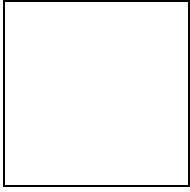
He is interested in selling part or all of the property. He would also be interested in jointly developing an access road and crossing with the Town if he were to retain part of the northern section.

This is a most attractive property and offers excellent recreational potential. Access can now be had from Old Kent Road and from the new Willimantic Cemetery, points that appear to be the access route for trail bikes.









General Suggestions for Protection of River Buffers

During our site visits, committee members noted various problems on private property along the rivers:

- lawns and sandy beaches at the water's edge
- insufficient buffer between farmland and the river
- informal dams built across the river
- dumping along the bank
- logging along the river
- camping next to the river
- septic systems in the floodplain (built before regulations)
- inadequate septic systems adjacent to river

It would be impossible for the town to own enough property or obtain enough protective easements to prevent these undesirable activities along the entire length of its rivers. Therefore, protection of most river frontage will rest in the hands of private property owners.

Most residents would be willing to ensure a protected buffer along the riverbank if they were aware of how these buffers benefit water quality, flood control and wildlife. The committee recommends that the town enlist the cooperation of river front property owners through a mailing. It would request their cooperation and educate them about the functions of a buffer zone and recommend good land-management practices, such as proper use of fertilizers. This mailing could be prepared by the town staff or by one of the town committees.

Such a mailing would be a timely effort because Connecticut's Department of Environmental Protection has mounted a major campaign to protect Connecticut's rivers, including proposed legislation that would mandate uniform buffer zones. The DEP plans to prepare educational material about river buffers and these may be available for a mailing.

The DEP Rivers Management Program will assist local residents to organize river watch groups that promote appreciation and stewardship of each of Connecticut's rivers. Recently, they helped form a Natchaug River watch group. The above mentioned mailing could encourage local residents to start a river watch, group for each of Mansfield's rivers.